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Socially Thirsty: Creating Families Connected Outside of Social Media

Abstract

"One of the shifts I've noticed is how more and more people are feeling increasingly lonely, depressed, and anxious even though we're in a time when we're more 'connected' than ever before."

Posting about the effects of social media on our human connections from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/socially-thirsty-creating-families-connected-outside-of-social-media/>

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Socially Thirsty: Creating Families Connected Outside of Social Media

Tara Boer

“I need to have a talk with my kid about commercials.”

My friend was talking about how her children become frustrated when they get interrupted by short advertisements while watching TV. As an adult raised in a pre-computer and pre-internet era, I know that these 60-80 second timed advertisements that occur when streaming live cable is nothing compared to the series of commercial interruptions I once experienced when we sat down to watch TV on Friday evenings with our heavy wooden TV. Our kids can hardly believe that there was a time when we needed to be physically present in the room while it was aired to be able to watch what we wanted to watch.

We all have a deep and created desire to feel connected and entertained. In his book, *Fully Charged*, Tom Rath cites research from 150,000 smartphone users and found that devices were unlocked 110 times per day on average, and during peak evening hours people checked their phones on average of 9 times per hour.^{[1](#)}

Whether we like it or not, our culture has shifted to accommodate the ever-growing need for people to feel connected. One of the shifts I’ve noticed is how more and more people are feeling increasingly lonely, depressed, and anxious even though we’re in a time when we’re more “connected” than ever before.

Last spring my students and I were talking about the [alarmingly high suicide rates](#). When I candidly asked them why they think suicides are trending this way, with no hesitation they almost unanimously answered, “cell phones.” With further probing they

shared that they too experience the negative personal effects associated with comparing pictures, “streaks” on snapchat, and viewing likes and followers on Twitter and Instagram. [Research](#) has also supported the correlation between increased social media use and mental health problems in our young people.

Psychiatrist and writer Bruce Perry has done extensive [research](#) on how meaningful personal connection is the antidote for many social, emotional, and psychological problems including depression, anxiety, and trauma. He would describe connection as feeling “safe, loved, and a strong sense of belonging.” He teaches that feeling connected and bonded to others allows us to experience unconditional acceptance as well as the opportunity to be completely loved despite our flaws. In his book, *The Boy Who was Raised as a Dog*, he says, “the capacity to love cannot be built in isolation.”[2](#)

So, if we’re supposedly “connected” but we’re still struggling emotionally and relationally, perhaps our connections through social media and our devices are superficial and are over-all less satisfying than face to face connections. Maybe God designed us to thrive in face-to-face relationships where we can be truly known and truly loved.

Below is a list of considerations I have compiled out of observations and research from my professional engagements with children and families struggling with mental health or relationship problems that seem to be negatively fueled by unhealthy boundaries with technology. Maybe one or a few of these suggestions will help you or your children integrate devices and social media in healthy ways and ensure meaningful face-to-face connections.

1. If you’re a parent of elementary or middle school child:

Consider the “Wait until 8th Pledge.” This movement encourages parents to come together and commit to waiting until 8th grade to give their children a smart phone (while still possibly considering a basic phone with talk/text if needed). “Wait until 8th” pledgers note the importance of encouraging middle schoolers to develop interpersonal social skills and have healthy face-to-face interactions with peers. Supporters point to the consequences of and dangers of access to social media and unsupervised internet access. This group prioritizes the importance of meaningful family time and personal connection with children during the most formational years of their life. I have observed families that have committed to this with their children and seen them thrive emotionally, spiritually, and relationally. Although kids sometimes complain and attempt to manipulate their desired needs, adults should consider that this commitment promotes brain growth and social/emotional development in age appropriate ways.

2. If you're the parent of a teenager:

Do you know what FOMO is? "Fear of missing out" means that teens will often engage with social media obsessively because they don't want to feel behind in their relationships. As caregivers, engage in open and consistent conversation about what you're observing about your teen's attitude, relationships, and behavior. Be curious about how interactions with peers on their devices might be affecting them. Set boundaries early and often regarding viewing, sending, or receiving inappropriate and unhealthy content. Because teenagers want to make their own choices, they will often make healthy decisions when they are intrinsically motivated (when they feel it's personally worth it and they are ready). Consider visiting [Protect Young Eyes](#) to view the latest and most threatening social media situations for our youth.

3. Consider disconnecting at certain hours of the day or during certain days of the week:

I have met individuals and families that commit to disconnecting during certain hours of the day. Some turn certain features on silent and/or establish Sundays as a day where phones are only used for phone calls. Their relationships are rewarded, and they are able to focus on things that really matter. Consider disconnecting your phone and notifications that trigger your immediate attention and check them during a planned time. Check to see if your phone has a "screen time" feature that might allow you really monitor your usage.

4. Only use your phone when you're alone:

Our phones are certainly convenient when standing in line or waiting for an appointment. Access to news and media offers information, catching up and connecting with friends and family members, as well as offers the ability to engage in social justice conversations. However, when in the presence of your family or friends, consider putting your devices away until you're alone.

5. Do an inventory on how you're affected:

I recently noticed that if I try to sneak in a quick social media fix while trying to parent, I become frustrated and irritated when my children suddenly need something (which is all the time). I find myself reading an article or blog post and somehow become offended when my young child wants a drink of water. Doing a personal inventory of how you and your family members are personally affected by your use or misuse of your devices is responsible, wise, and honors your family.

6. Listen to conviction and follow-through:

In scripture God tells us to take every thought captive (I Corinthians 10:5). God also promises to give wisdom to those who ask for it (James 1:5). If you need wisdom and if you're willing to allow God to shape your life, your habits, and your family; you'll have the courage to ask Him if you need to change and you'll follow-through when He gives you an answer.

FOOTNOTES

1. Rath, T. (2015). *Are you fully charged? The 3 keys to energizing your work and life*. Silicon Guild
2. Perry, B. & Szalavitz, M. (2006). *The boy who was raised as a dog: And other stories from a child psychiatrist's notebook. What traumatized children can teach us about loss, love, and healing*. Philadelphia, PA: Basic Books